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White Death: Ibn al-ʿArabī on the Trials and Virtues of Hunger and Fasting

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The article presents an analysis of Ibn al-ʿArabī's (d. 1240) treatment of fasting and hunger as it appears in chapters 106 and 107 of *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Meccan revelations). In the process of examining this very short section of the encyclopedic text, the essay both draws out the deeper theological significance of hunger and fasting and highlights the virtues and trappings of the spiritual exercise in the mystic's thought. An attempt is also made to situate some of Ibn al-ʿArabī's ideas within the broader context of the earlier Sufi tradition to which he was heir.

Fasting stands as one of the most widespread religious practices in human history. Undertaken as a form of penance, a preparatory rite before initiation, a method to induce visions and veridical dreams, a means to avert natural catastrophes, an expression of either mourning or thanksgiving, or simply as a mechanism to control and tame the passions by curbing their sources of nourishment, it is found in virtually every culture and society.[1] While the forms it has assumed have varied considerably across time and place, at the heart of the ritual lies a desire to approach the world of spirits, and beyond that, ultimate reality itself, through a conscious, voluntary, and self-imposed experience of hunger.[2]

In Islam fasting (*ṣawm*) is collectively undertaken during Ramaḍān on a scale that, in the modern world, is perhaps unmatched by any other religious community.[3] "Fasting is prescribed for you," the Quran declares, "as it was prescribed for those before you, that you might grow in God-consciousness" (2:183).[4] But for many devout Muslims the subjugation of the body to hunger and thirst through fasting goes well beyond the holy month, and extends to the recommended days of ʿArafa, ʿĀshūrāʾ, the "white nights" (days 13, 14, and 15 of the lunar calendar corresponding to the full moon), the six days of Shawwāl after Ramaḍān, the first ten days of Dhū al-Ḥijja, the first day of Muḥarram, the alternating fast on Mondays and Thursdays, the fast every other day (termed "the fast of David"), and beyond that to just about any day of the year on which one might feel inspired—excluding the two Eids when it is explicitly prohibited.[5]

Author's note: I would like to express my gratitude to Eric Winkel, who provided invaluable assistance in deciphering some of the trickier passages of the *Futūḥāt,* as well as to Hany T. Ibrahim, Peri Bearman, Shuaib Ally, and the anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive feedback at different stages of the article.

1. See Hastings 1908–28, 5: 759–71, at 759. Cf. von Braun 2006; Russell 2005.

2. Thirst certainly plays an important role in the Islamic fast, but there are forms of fasting that exclude abstention from water.

3. On the significance of the month in Islamic history, piety, and scripture, see Goiten 1966; Nasr 1981: 214–15; Neuwirth 2004.

4. The translations of the Quranic verses that follow are my own, although I have made occasional use of the renditions of A. J. Arberry, M. Asad, M. Pickthall, and *The Study Quran*.

5. To which we may add the prohibited days of *tashrīq*, 11th, 12th, and 13th of Dhū al-Ḥijja. Naturally, the precise status of fasting on the aforementioned days was the subject of some juridical debate. On the recommended fasts, see al-Ghazālī 1998, 1: 407–10 (for the translation of the sixth book, see Fitzgerald 2018). Cf. Maḥmūd 2017. Among the Twelver Shiʿa, the fast on ʿĀshūrāʾ is prohibited. On the history of the ʿĀshūrāʾ fast, see Bashear 2004.

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The value ascribed to *ṣawm* is attested to in both the example of the Prophet as well as his many counsels. "Everything has a door," he once said, "and the door of devotional worship (*ʿibāda*) lies in the fast."[6] He also said, "Patience is half of faith," and "Half of patience lies in the fast."[7] Once a companion belched crudely in his presence, leading the Prophet to warn, "Those of you most satiated in this world will be hungriest in the next." On hearing this the man replied, "By God, from this day on I will never fill my belly to its full."[8] So proverbial was the austerity of the Prophet that ʿĀʾisha (d. 678), his youngest wife, complained, "The first innovation (*bidʿa*) introduced after the death of the Messenger of God was satiety (*shabʿ*)."[9] This is not to suggest that he denied himself the pleasures of life, discerning in them divine gifts, as is attested to by numerous traditions. In the words of Valerie Hoffman, the "overall attitude of Ḥadīth is that the Muslims should be neither too worldly nor too other-worldly: they should take, in the words of one *ḥadīth*, from both this world and the next."[10] Nevertheless, the Prophet's moderation certainly tilted in the direction of abstinence, and it was this propensity toward abstention that became the basis for the emphasis placed on *ṣawm* and hunger in the Sufi tradition, particularly among the early ascetics, the *zuhhād*.

The present article examines two very short chapters from Ibn al-ʿArabī's (d. 1240) *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* on the trials and virtues of abstaining from food and drink, respectively entitled "On knowledge of the hunger that is sought" (*Fī maʿrifat al-jūʿ al-maṭlūb*) and "On abandoning hunger" (*Fī tark al-jūʿ*).[11] While the mystic addresses the question of fasting extensively in chapter seventy-one on the "mysteries of fasting" (*asrār al-ṣawm*), our focus will remain principally on the two chapters under consideration with a few excursions into other sections of the text. The two terse chapters fall within the broader section of the *Futūḥāt* devoted to the stations of the way, where Ibn al-ʿArabī examines in great length the metaphysical foundations of Sufi ethics.

Ibn al-ʿArabī opens the first of the two chapters by delineating the four deaths (*arbaʿa mawtāt*) that the spiritual itinerant must undergo on the journey to God,[12] each of which forms an indispensable element in the Sufi tradition of the *mawt* alluded to in the well-known hadith, "Die before you die."[13] These deaths[14] include the "green death" of wearing patched clothing as a mark of renunciation, similar in many ways to the "vow of poverty" found among Christian monks. ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644), we are informed, wore a robe of thirteen patches.[15] The symbolic significance of the color lies, according to some authorities, in its power to bring to life an essential inward beauty of the soul, which is free of the need of

6. Cited in al-Makkī 1995, 2: 332.

7. Both cited in al-Suhrawardī 2005: 346.

8. Al-Makkī 1995, 2: 325.

9. Al-Makkī 1995, 2: 327.

10. Hoffman 1995: 467. Hoffman's article is the single best survey of fasting in the Islamic mystical tradition. On fasting in early Muslim spirituality, see Gramlich 1997: 222–49, Khalil forthcoming; for a recent analysis of the eating habits of early Sufis, see Salamah-Qudsi 2019.

11. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 13: 637–45. While the translations that follow are my own, I have liberally consulted Eric Winkel's rendition in his preprint edition (2016: 249–57).

12. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 13: 637–38.

13. See the brief remarks on the significance of this tradition in Sufism by Ritter 2003: 193, 601; and Schimmel 2011: 135, 320.

14. The types of deaths explained here have been explained in greater detail by al-Sharnūbī 2011: 57. This work by the early twentieth-century Azhari scholar forms a commentary on a Sufi poem composed by his distant ancestor Shaykh Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad al-Sharnūbī (d. 995*h*/1585f.).

15. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 13: 637. Although as an Egyptian Sufi shaykh humorously informed me, in light of contemporary fashion trends "green death" must be appropriately contextualized.

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outward ornamentation.[16] Then there is the "black death" of patiently enduring the offenses and injuries of others (*taḥammul al-adhā*), without seeking retaliation or retribution. The harm (*adhan*) the wayfarer endures in a state of patience is similar to that which God himself patiently endures at the hands of humans, as Ibn al-ʿArabī explains in his chapter on the station of patience.[17] In addition, there is the "red death" of opposing the soul's desires and baser inclinations (*mukhālafat al-nafs fī aghrāḍihā*), often explored in Sufi literature within the context of *mujāhada* and the "inner jihad."[18] A tradition of ʿAlī (d. 661) describes "red death" as death "by the sword"[19]—a death that may be interpreted in a more mystical sense as by the sword that bleeds and slays unruly passions. Red is after all the color of blood, the life-force that animates and sustains the body, and is sometimes associated in Persian color symbolism with "cheeks and bridal veils,"[20] and beyond that, erotic love, although the association with Eros cannot be pressed too far due to the noncelibate nature of Islamic spirituality, one that frequently combined detachment with married life.[21] Finally, there is the "white death" (*al-mawt al-abyaḍ*) of hunger (*jūʿ*)—its whiteness at least partially the result of the pale complexion or loss of "vital redness" of the one deprived of food and drink. ʿAlī's description of "white death" as death by plague (*ṭāʿūn*) seems to complement this view, since plague often brings with it famine and starvation.[22] Those versed in the medieval Islamicate folkloric tradition may also recall the story of Adam fasting in repentance after the Fall on the three "white days" of the full moon of the lunar calendar, through which he regained the lightness of a skin tone that had turned black from disobedience.[23] While there is no evidence to suggest that Ibn al-ʿArabī himself draws on this tradition, at least in its literal sense, and while the "spiritual racializing" in the story reflects certain ethnocentric undercurrents within Near Eastern culture that long predated Islam, and which are absent in Ibn al-ʿArabī, the noncanonical tale may nevertheless be interpreted symbolically as a reference to the inward illumination brought about through voluntary hunger. This is because the soul purified through such a practice may be said to reflect the radiance of the divine light—much as the moon reflects the sun on the nights of the "white days" on which Adam fasted—thereby allowing the human being to realize her theomorphic nature as *imago dei* on earth. The close relationship between fasting and interior illumination finds confirmation in Kāshānī's (d. bet. 1329 and 1335) *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*, where he explains that the hunger of the Sufis is named "white death" because it "whitens the interior and illuminates the face of the heart."[24]

Ibn al-ʿArabī's debt to the early tradition is revealed by the fact that in his stipulation of the necessity of traversing four deaths, he is almost certainly drawing on al-Qushayrī's (d. 1072) *Risāla*, a manual he studied closely under the tutelage of one of his masters, the

16. Al-Sharnūbī 2011: 57. Sometimes it is also referred to as "yellow death" (*al-mawt al-aṣfar*).

17. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990: chap. 124: "Know—God grant you success—that God most High says, «Those who harm (*yu'dhūna*) God and his Messenger» [Q 33:57], thereby making it clear that he is harmed. He is named *al-ṣabūr* on account of the harm [he endures] of his creation."

18. Al-Sharnūbī 2011: 57–58.

19. The tradition is retraced to the eleventh-century Shiʿi scholar al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (1995, 2: 372).

20. Schimmel 1992: 265.

21. While applicable to medieval Christian piety, Tor Andrae's claim (1987: 52) that if celibacy is the first commandment of the mystical life, then fasting is the second, cannot properly be applied to Islam. Thus, for example, we can read in Ibn al-ʿArabī (1971: 96) an account of a saintly man who despite his renunciation could not live outside of married life, with such a state not negating his piety in the least, neither in the eyes of our mystic nor of others who knew the man.

22. Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd 1995, 2: 372.

23. Al-Suhrawardī 2005: 351.

24. Kāshānī 1992: s.v. al-mawt al-abyaḍ. For a comparative analysis of modern and premodern racism, see Ogunnaike 2016.

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saintly Yūsuf al-Kūmī, and through which he obtained his first exposure to the technical lexicon of the Sufis.[25] In fact, Ibn al-ʿArabī was so committed to the study of this work while he was in Andalusia that he was surnamed after its author.[26] In the *Risāla* we find a saying of Ḥātim al-Aṣamm (d. 852), a disciple of the celebrated Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 810), which records what may be one of the earliest descriptions of the necessary requirements of the spiritual life. "Whoever desires to follow our way," declared Ḥātim, "must assume four qualities of death (*arbaʿa khiṣāl min al-mawt*): white death, which is hunger; black death, which is putting up with the harms of others; red death, which is sincere activity in opposing the lower soul (*mukhālafat al-hawāʾ*); and green death, which is wearing a garment whose patches have been stitched one over the other."[27] The strongly ascetic impulse behind Ḥātim's words, emblematic of the mode of piety fostered in the early tradition, was in his particular case likely due to the influence of his teacher Shaqīq, who was himself a disciple of Ibrāhīm b. Adham, renowned for having renounced an entire kingdom to live in prayer and poverty (*faqr*), and for becoming a model of the latter virtue for posterity.[28] From Ḥātim we have another saying, reflective of the same self-abnegating qualities for which Ibrāhīm became so well known: "A morning does not pass," he remarked, "without Satan asking me, 'What will you eat? What will you wear? And where will you live?' I answer, 'I shall eat death, I shall wear the shroud, and I shall live in the grave'."[29]

Ibn al-ʿArabī then turns to explain the purpose behind *al-jūʿ al-maṭlūb*, the hunger that is sought. It is, he states, a voluntary hunger whereby the natural constitution of the body is maintained in such a manner that it is given no more than it absolutely needs, while remaining free of all excess (*taqlīl fuḍūl al-ṭabʿ*). It is also to allow for a stillness from movements toward fulfilling the usual needs of the body (*al-sukūn ʿan al-ḥaraka ilā al-ḥāja*), thereby facilitating through an external quieting of motion an inward tranquility. More importantly, beyond all of these it is to realize or participate in *al-ṣifa al-ṣamadāniyya*, the quality of God's eternal self-sufficiency, his freedom from want and need—exemplified by the divine name *al-Ṣamad*.[30] But what precisely might Ibn al-ʿArabī mean here? How is fasting tied to God's *ṣamadāniyya* (or *ṣamadiyya*)? To better understand what our mystic has in mind, we must turn to the tenth-century treatise on the rules of the inward life, Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's (d. 988) *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*. In his brief but penetrating chapter on the *ṣawm*, he opens his inquiry with a commentary on the well-known divine tradition (*ḥadīth qudsī*), "The fast is mine, and its recompense belongs to me" (*al-ṣawm lī wa-anā ajzī bihi*). In his explanation, he draws attention to two levels of meaning in the divine report. The first of these is that since the fast is the only act of devotional piety that involves the abstention of an act—unlike every other form of religious activity—the one who fasts is marked by a special kind of sincerity in that his piety remains entirely hidden from the gaze of others. The nature of the devotional act therefore confers upon the one who undertakes it a certain measure of protection from hypocrisy, since there is nothing to show or to be seen. The fast "is mine," explains al-Sarrāj,

25. Ibn al-ʿArabī's relationship with this master was so intimate that after his death he would summon his spirit at will to seek counsel on a spiritual matter. See Corbin 1969: 224.

26. That is to say, he was given the surname "al-Qushayrī." Addas 1993: 102. For more on Ibn al-ʿArabī's use of the *Risāla*, see Chodkiewicz 2009.

27. Al-Qushayrī 2002: 83 (section on Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ḥātim b. ʿAlwān).

28. See Khalil 2016.

29. Al-Qushayrī 2002: 82 (section on Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ḥātim b. ʿAlwān).

30. The name occurs once in the Quran (112:2). It has been variously rendered by translators as "The Everlasting Refuge" (Arberry), "The Eternal, Absolute" (Yusuf Ali), "He on whom all depend" (Shakir), "The Eternal, Uncaused Cause of all Being" (Asad), and the "Eternally Sufficient unto Himself" (*Study Quran*).

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because no one sees it but God alone. Secondly, and more relevant to our purposes, since the fast involves not only the absence of an act, but also withholding from oneself what nourishes the natural constitution of the body, it allows the one who fasts to participate, commensurate to her own level of existence, in God's own independence, in his quality of *ṣamadiyya* and therefore, paradoxically, in divine transcendence (*tanzīh*). When the faster forgoes food and drink, thereby overcoming the most elemental desire of the body, she becomes divine-like through a participation in God's freedom from material nourishment, since after all he neither eats nor drinks.[31] The fast is therefore the only act that allows the human being to experience and take part in the otherness of God, in a nature that remains eternally qualified by complete independence.[32] Moreover, the reward that God has in store for the fast transcends human imagination because the act itself transcends acts, and because it involves the assumption of a divine quality, in this case that of transcendence through *ṣamadiyya*. Additionally, the reward has no limit, since the act, being the absence of an act, itself has no limit (at least not in the conventional sense), and also because the *ṣāʾimūn* (those who fast) are *ṣābirūn* (patient), and "the *ṣābirūn* will receive their rewards without limits" (Q 39:10)[33]—whence the final refrain of the *ḥadīth qudsī*, "and its recompense belongs to me."[34]

The fact that Ibn al-ʿArabī is developing this line of thinking is confirmed when we turn to chapter 71 of the *Futūḥāt*. There he explicitly draws the aforementioned connection and elaborates it in remarkable detail, in a way that allows us to better appreciate the full import behind al-Sarrāj's words. The Prophet, we are told, was once approached by one of his companions for counsel. "Take upon yourself the fast," he replied, "for it has no likeness" (*lā mithla lahu*)[35]—the final words being critical here since they echo a scriptural passage frequently cited in classical discussions around Islamic theology. The uniqueness of the fast among devotional acts, argues Ibn al-ʿArabī, is not only because it entails the abandoning of an act (*tark*), but because it is analogous to God's uniqueness among created things, since "there is nothing like unto him" (*laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ*) (Q 42:11). Through the *lā mithla lahu* of the fast, declares the mystic, the one who fasts becomes dissolved in the *laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ* of God, that is to say, in divine *tanzīh*. When the hadith has God state, "the fast is mine," it is because of the unique meeting between the divine and human orders that takes place through the *ṣawm*, where God himself becomes the reward of the one who fasts, or to be more precise, where God himself becomes the *ṣāʾim*. And this, as we have seen, is because the *ṣāʾim* assumes the divine attribute of *ṣamadāniyya*, or the divine name *al-Ṣamad*, by forgoing his own creaturely attribute of eating and drinking. However, the divine transcendence in which the human being participates must be qualified since it is limited in nature, not total in its scope—absolute transcendence belonging to divine majesty alone—and this is due to the compulsion of the human being (both by nature and religious law) to eventually break the fast, unlike God whose fast is enteral since he remains eternally free of want.[36]

31. "The *ṣamad* is the one who has no *jawf* [belly, stomach, cavity, hollowness]. He has need for neither food nor drink." Al-Sarrāj 2001: 151.

32. Al-Ṣarrāj 2001: 151.

33. The intimate relationship between patience and fasting, highlighted in the hadith cited above, was extensively developed in Sufi literature, particularly in light of classical definitions of patience, *ṣabr*, as an act of "self-restraint" or "holding the soul back" (*ḥabs al-nafs*). See, for example, Hujwīrī 1992: 321–22.

34. Al-Ṣarrāj 2001: 151–52. See also Hujwīrī's explanation of this tradition (1992: 320).

35. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 9: 103, 104. While I have consulted the English rendition of this chapter by A. Bewley (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2009), the translations that follow are my own.

36. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 9: 103.

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Yet the unique relation between the human fast and divine *ṣamadāniyya* remains, and it is highlighted again by Ibn al-ʿArabī when he draws attention to a little-known hadith, "Do not say Ramaḍān for Ramaḍān is a name (*ism*) from among the names of God Most High."[37] While the chain of transmission of the tradition in question—also cited by al-Ghazālī[38]—was subject to some criticism by the hadith scholars due to the weakness of one of its links, for Ibn al-ʿArabī it is strengthened through an implied confirmation of its content present in scripture: when the Quran speaks of Ramaḍān, it either prefaces it by "the month of" (as in *shahr ramaḍān*, Q 2:185), or refers to it simply as "the month" (also Q 2:185), but it never identifies it as Ramaḍān alone, and this is at least partially to allude to its status as a divine name. That is to say, the name is distinguished from the month named after it because the latter is always qualified by *shahr*. Furthermore, as in the case of the *ṣawm*, Ramaḍān "has no likeness" because it is the only month of the lunar calendar named after a name of God. And since this is the month in which the self-disclosure of God's *ṣamadāniyya* occurs collectively in the Muslim community of fasters, the meaning of its name is itself *ṣamad*, thereby rendering Ramaḍān the month of *ṣamadāniyya*. In other words, the self-disclosure of God's *ṣamadāniyya* occurs in its fullness in the month after which it is named. Ibn al-ʿArabī is adamant that the uniqueness of the month is not on account of its holiness or sanctity, since Rajab was described by the Prophet as sacred (*muḥarram*).[39] Its uniqueness—apart from being the month of revelatory descent—lies in it being the only month named after a divine *ism*, the meaning of which calls attention to God's eternal self-sufficiency, independence, and freedom from want.[40]

Returning to chapter 106, Ibn al-ʿArabī continues by explaining that the hunger that is sought—the white death that illumines the heart—must be entirely voluntary (*ikhtiyārī*) and constrained by religious law. It does not apply to those deprived of food by necessity, poverty, or from illness, or to those whose mystical states and divine inrushes are so intense that they are incapacitated from eating and drinking. Nor, for that matter, does it apply to those fed from the unseen world in such a way that the effects of the supernatural nourishment are discernible in their bodily powers (*quwwa*), soundness of mind (*siḥḥat al-ʿaql*) and the preservation of their temperament and constitution (*ḥifẓ al-mizāj*).[41] The Prophet himself, according to Muslim belief, experienced such nourishment, on account of which he would prohibit his disciples from fasting for as long as he did lest they harm themselves out of a desire to emulate his model. His saying "God gives me food and drink" is well known in Islamic tradition.[42] In early Sufi texts, similar claims were also made about the friends of God, namely, that some of them could be nourished from the unseen, not because their ranks were equal to that of the Prophet, but because as "inheritors of prophets" their *karāmāt* or charismatic gifts followed the *muʿjizāt* or miracles of God's messengers.[43] In an autobio-

37. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 9: 115.

38. Al-Ghazālī 2008: 237.

39. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 9: 116. For a historical analysis of the significance of the month, see Kister 1971.

40. In later tradition we find a curious application of this insight into the nature of the fast in a debate in Islamic jurisprudence. In *al-Mīzān al-kubrā*, al-Shaʿrānī (d. 1573) notes that among those who inclined toward the view that the use of the *miswāk* (tooth-cleaner) was permissible during the fast, one group argued that because the fast involves participation in *ṣifa ṣamadāniyya*, it requires remaining free—like God himself—of human imperfections, blemishes, and impurities, in both the sensorial and spiritual dimensions of the human being. Thus, just as the fasting person must refrain from foul and pungent speech, such as backbiting, slander, and lying, he should also strive to keep himself free of foul and pungent odors. See al-Shaʿrānī n.d., 2: 26.

41. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 13: 639.

42. Muslim, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-ṣawm, nos. 2426–30.

43. Cf. the sections on fasting and hunger in al-Sarrāj 2001.

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graphical interlude elsewhere, Ibn al-ʿArabī professes to have undergone similar nourishment, so much so that its signs became visible in the plumpness of his body.[44] But this is not the white death of which Ibn al-ʿArabī speaks, the value of which lies in the faster's "taste" of hunger. The special merit of the *jūʿ* under consideration applies only to those who have the means to eat and drink (*ṣāḥib fāʾida*) but consciously and willfully abstain, being nourished neither "from above" nor from within the confines of the ritual fast. The emphasis Ibn al-ʿArabī seems to place on the value of *experiencing* hunger cannot be overstated, and may be better appreciated when we consider that the supreme fast in Muslim tradition lies in the fast of David, since it prevents the body from becoming so habituated to *ṣawm* that it no longer feels the deprivation of food and drink.

Ibn al-ʿArabī insists throughout the chapter that the hunger that is sought must be pursued within the boundaries of the ritual fast: "We have no way to God," he states, "except through what has been revealed (*al-wajh al-mashrūʿ*)."[45] If there were a method of hunger more beneficial for the human soul than *ṣawm*, then God would have revealed it, but he did not. Moreover, to breach the norms of the fast through Herculean feats of asceticism is to display discourtesy to God (*sūʾ al-adab*).[46] "It is necessary for the upright wayfarer that he not exceed the bounds set by the law," declares Ibn al-ʿArabī, "in order that he may be a follower, for to abandon an act out of compliance yields a greater reward than to act out of innovation (*ibtidāʿ*)."[47] Thus, if one desires to pursue a hunger that bears fruit, it must be undertaken in the *ṣawm* proper. Commenting on perhaps the most frequently cited hadith in Sufi literature on fasting and hunger, "Verily Satan flows through the child of Adam as blood flows, so stem his flow by hunger and thirst," our mystic notes that both the ulema and "people of God" are in complete agreement that it was not hunger alone but the hunger of the ritual fast that the Prophet was alluding to, as well as "reducing the amount of food in the predawn meal for the one who is continuing [the fast], and reducing it during the evening's breaking of the fast for the one who is not."[48] But to encourage wayfarers to hunger outside of the fast is a feature of the "people of error from among the people of this way" (*ahl al-ghalaṭ min ahl hādhihi al-ṭarīq*).

The cardinal place Ibn al-ʿArabī assigns to confining hunger as a spiritual method to the ritual fast affords him an opportunity to voice his criticisms of wayfarers and even spiritual guides who went astray on the matter. Among the cases he singles out, Ibn al-ʿArabī cites those "who have their disciples fast only to have them eat before the sun sets," i.e., before the time for the breaking of the fast technically arrives. This is an "error on their part and reflects an ignorance of the way laid out by God (*ṭarīq Allāh*)." If by such a strategy they sought to oppose the self (*mukhālafat al-nufūs*), there were, he argues, other means available to them more congruent with the religious law. From his brief remark—an admonition to the reader not to fall into a similar trap—it is unclear precisely why those attributed with such an anomalous practice would have undertaken it, or what their justification might have been. Some light may be shed on this matter, however, if we turn again to al-Sarrāj's *Lumaʿ*, where after a brief overview of fasting and hunger, he highlights some of the variations of the practice among his contemporaries and predecessors, as well as some of the debates about these practices. Among the examples he provides, he cites the case of a man who would break his

44. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 8: 345.

45. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 13: 638.

46. For a comprehensive overview of *adab* in Ibn al-ʿArabī, see Gril 1993. See also Chittick 1989: 175. For a recent compilation of essays on *adab* in Sufism, see Chiabotti et al. 2016.

47. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 13: 640.

48. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 13: 640–41.

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fast before the time for completing it had arrived as a way of disciplining his soul. His reasoning, al-Sarrāj clarifies, was that he would experience the hardships of the fast without the pleasure of having completed it, and without the satisfaction of anticipating a reward from God for its fulfillment. To quote the passage in its entirety:

> It has reached me that one of the inhabitants of Wāsiṭ fasted for many years, but would break his fast before sunset (*qabla ghurūb al-shams*) except in the month of Ramaḍān. A group of people censured him for it because it had no basis in revealed knowledge, even though the fast was voluntary. Another group commended the practice because the individual in question sought to tame his soul through hunger without deriving pleasure from the fast, and without the reward that God has promised the person who fasts—he took no satisfaction from that. In my view those who censured him were correct, because he intended to fast, and therefore its fulfillment was binding on him. If he did not intend to fast, then he was practicing austerity with respect to food, and of such a person it cannot be said that he is fasting at all. Success lies with God.[49]

Al-Sarrāj's view of the matter, as the passage makes clear, is similar to that of our mystic. The great Sufi master and contemporary of Ibn al-ʿArabī, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1234), also weighed in on the debate with a perceptive observation in his *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif*, even specifically mentioning al-Sarrāj by name: even though the man in question deprived himself of the pleasure of the fast, he still obtained the pleasure of its abandonment, and this was because he broke a fast that was close to completion as a way of taming the soul, but in such a way that a subtle joy remained inescapable. For al-Suhrawardī, since a sweetness and sense of accomplishment was inevitable, whether he completed the fast or ended it before its completion, it would have been better for the man to keep to the rules of the religious law by carrying out the fast to its proper end.[50] In the context of this discussion, Ibn al-ʿArabī adds that if one's intention is to oppose the self with respect to food, one should simply oppose it, outside of the fast, in what one eats. And this may be obtained by consuming lawful food for which one has a natural distaste, as a way of taming the soul, and beyond that, unearthing God's hidden blessings in it.

It should be clarified that even though Ibn al-ʿArabī emphasizes the importance of pursuing hunger through the fast, it does not follow that he encourages satiety (*shabʿ*), let alone eating to one's full, outside of the fast's confines. As he states in chapter 107, which runs no more than a few lines, "abandoning hunger in the eyes of the people of God is not satiety; instead, it is to give the self (*nafs*) its right with respect to the nourishment through which God maintains its health and the uprightness of its form."[51] Drawing attention to the dangers inherent in pursuing fasting and hunger to extremes, he cites the example of Abū al-Dardāʾ (d. 652), who went to such lengths in his ascetic self-mortification that he began to neglect the needs of his body and family. When the Prophet was informed of the self-lacerating regimen of his companion, he warned him to exercise moderation. "Stand up at night in prayer and sleep," he instructed, "fast and break the fast, and give each owner of a right its right." But the balance encouraged by the Prophet, as noted above, tilted toward renunciation, so much so that it would not be inaccurate to describe his way as that of a "moderate asceticism." Above all, the Prophet, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, discouraged extremes. While his spiritual method gravitated toward austerity, it was an austerity that avoided harming the body and embodied simplicity more than anything else. This seems to be what our mystic has in mind when he speaks of the value of abandoning hunger, that is to say, the necessity of a spiritual

49. Al-Sarrāj 2001: 155.
50. Al-Suhrawardī 2005: 350.
51. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1990, 9: 644.

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life that combines the experience of hunger with one that gives the body its due, lest the aspirant become too narrowly fixated on bodily self-denial alone or fall into asceticism for its own sake.[52]

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52. On transcending or moving beyond the limitations of each of the virtues, see Abrahamov 2010. See also my observations in Khalil 2018: 45–51.

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